

‘Debating methodology in economic geography’

21 April 2004, School of Geography, University of Nottingham

The annual EGRG symposium, hosted by the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham, met to debate methodological issues in economic geography. Dr Michael Samers (University of Nottingham) had organised an exciting programme, chaired by Professor Louise Crewe (University of Nottingham). The afternoon opened with two plenary presentations from contrasting methodological stances made by Professor Mick Dunford (University of Sussex) and Dr Ian Cook (University of Birmingham).

Professor Dunford demonstrated how quantitative methods can be used to make links between individual case studies and broader economic contexts. For Professor Dunford, such an approach would allow geographers to draw decisive, clearly demonstrable conclusions from our research, something that economic geographers have become increasingly concerned to do. Dr Cook used his presentation to explore a culturally inflected economic geography of papaya, paying particular attention to the role of different individuals, operating in different times and places in the production and consumption of papaya and papaya related products. Methodologically, he concentrated on the papaya itself, tracing it through a series of (dis)entanglements to demonstrate the complicated nature of any politics of consumption.

The ensuing debate was led by responses from five panellists, who outlined their own methodological preferences with reference to the plenary presentations. Dr Paul Plummer (University of Bristol) called for a greater attentiveness to the difference between methodology and method by exploring how we move between theory and observation in the research process. Dr Andrew Jones (Birkbeck College, University of London) argued that geographers have not paid adequate attention to the politics of knowledge implicit within all research projects – who are we producing the knowledge for, how are we presenting it and how does this impact on our methodological choices?

Dr Alison Stenning (University of Newcastle) argued that we should aim to move beyond the binarism that has developed between qualitative and quantitative methods. She outlined ways of achieving this, including the development of multi-sited research projects and participatory and activist based research. Professor Adrian Smith (Queen Mary’s, University of London) explored how we move from our theoretical understanding of the world to derive research questions that we can then interrogate through the appropriate selection of research methods, arguing that we need to choose our methods in the light of who we are conducting the research for,

Finally, Professor Ron Martin from the University of Cambridge called for a turn to a multi method economic geography that could speak with conviction beyond the academy to the policy community. He demonstrated the utility of such an approach by drawing on his own policy orientated research for a range of policy institutions at both the national and international scales.

The symposium was well attended and all those present benefited from a stimulating afternoon’s discussion that built on last year’s symposium on inter-disciplinarity and economic geography.

Sarah Hall
EGRG Post-graduate representative
University of Bristol